

## AFTER THE ARCHIVE: EARLY DYNASTIC I OCCUPATION AT JEMDET NASR, IRAQ

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The mounds of Jemdet Nasr in south central Iraq are justly famous for the collection of protohistoric tablets recovered from the larger of the two mounds in the course of excavations by Stephen Langdon, Ernest Mackay and Louis Watelin in the 1920s (Langdon 1928). Written in a protocuneiform script which bears an as yet uncertain relation to the Sumerian language, well over 200 tablets were recovered from a large building which also yielded a distinctive assemblage of painted pottery and cylinder seals with stylised designs (Mackay 1931). At the time of its discovery this material culture assemblage was seen as distinct enough to represent a cultural timespan, the Jemdet Nasr period, chronologically situated between the Uruk and Early Dynastic periods. In approximate terms, the Jemdet Nasr period was understood to cover a period of some two centuries around the turn of the fourth to third millennia BC. Later difficulties in defining and identifying the cultural markers of the Jemdet Nasr period led to some doubt about its existence (Finkbeiner and Röllig 1986), but more recent work at Nippur, Fara and again at Jemdet Nasr has tended to support the existence of such a period, be it brief and regionally restricted (Martin 1988; Matthews 1989; 1990; Wilson 1986). In addition, new publications of the textual and other material from Jemdet Nasr have helped our comprehension of the significance of this cultural assemblage (Englund and Grégoire 1991; Matthews 1992; 1993).

It is perhaps less well known that the site of Jemdet Nasr continued to be occupied into the first part of the Early Dynastic period, and it is the remains of this period with which this paper is concerned. It is felt to be fitting to offer a paper on this theme as a tribute to Professor Fujii in view of his important work at the site of Tell Gubba in the Hamrin region of Iraq, where excavation revealed occupation largely contemporary with that at Jemdet Nasr.

In the autumns of 1988 and 1989 two seasons of fieldwork were conducted at Jemdet Nasr by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. The general aim of this renewed work at the site was to set the remarkable finds of the 1920s excavations within a more rigorously defined archaeological framework. The recording of the two seasons in 1926 and 1928 was less than satisfactory, so that we had little real idea of the true contexts within which the protocuneiform tablets and other items had been located. Our objective, therefore, was to relocate the large building from which the tablets had been excavated and to investigate previously unexcavated parts of this building and adjacent deposits. In the course of these activities it was soon established that occupation at Jemdet Nasr was not restricted exclusively to the Jemdet Nasr period.

Investigations across Mound B, the larger of the two mounds which make up the site, showed that as far as surface remains are concerned the southwestern region of the mound includes Late Uruk deposits, while the northern part of the mound, within which the large building is located, is principally of Jemdet Nasr date on the surface (Fig. 1). Across the centre of the mound, however, are traces of Early Dynastic I occupation, suggesting the existence of a small settlement of this date after the abandonment of much of the rest of the mound.

Before examining the Early Dynastic I evidence from Mound B, we can mention the contemporary evidence from Mound A, the smaller mound to the west. Mound A is capped by a baked brick building of uncertain date, but perhaps Neo-Babylonian or Parthian, underlying which are Late Ubaid deposits.

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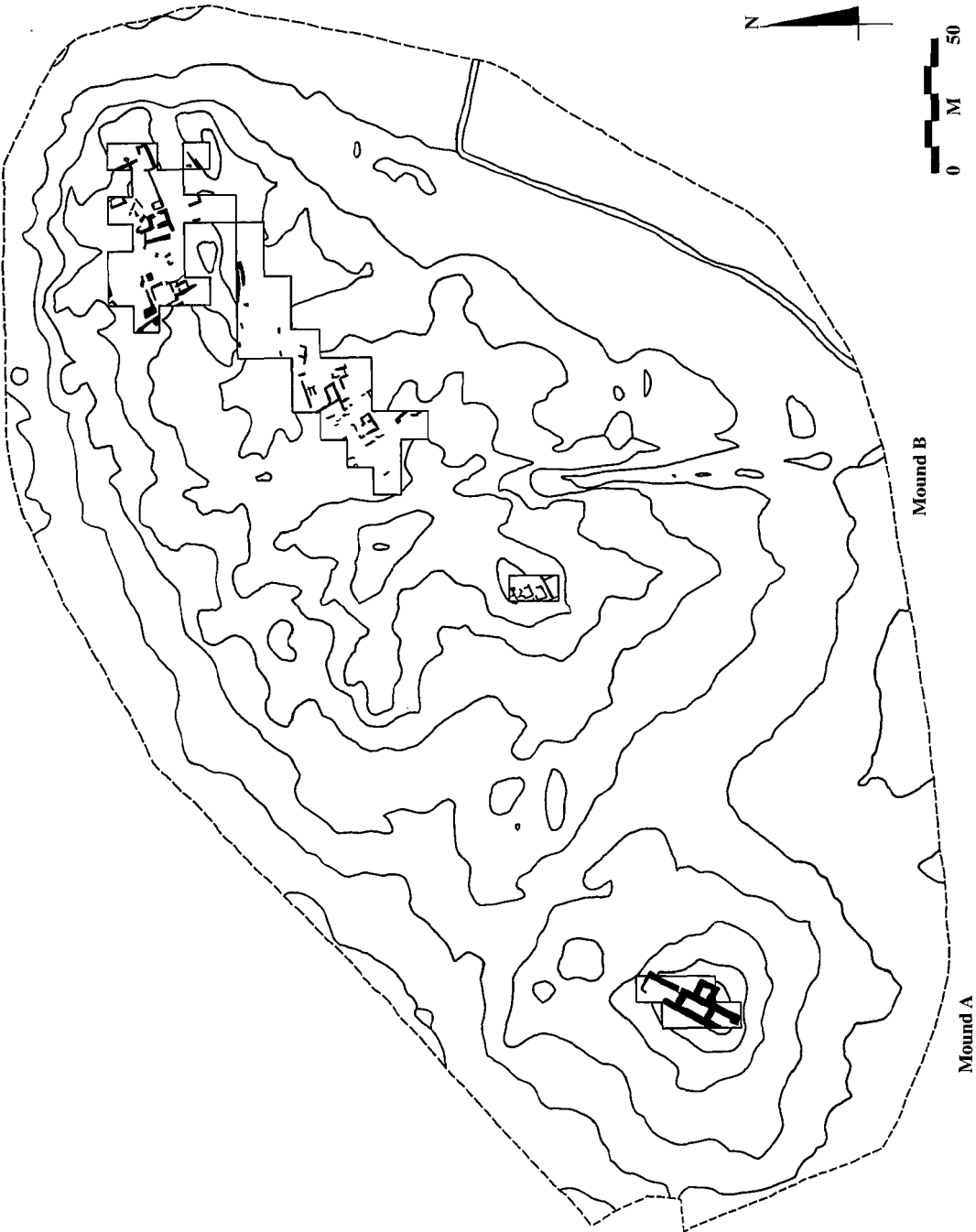


Fig. 1 Contour plan of Jemdet Nasr, Mounds A and B, showing planned surface architecture.

Cut into the Ubaid deposits, however, is at least one burial of Early Dynastic I date, excavated by us in 1988. This grave yielded a collection of artefacts, Figs. 2–3, including several stone vessels, carnelian and shell beads, marble frogs with inlaid eyes, and a stamp seal with a design of cats, similar to an example from Gubba (Fujii 1981: Fig. 22:16). The stone vessels, in particular, have good Early Dynastic I parallels from Fara, Kish, Telloh and Ur (for discussion of this burial, see Matthews 1989: 244–246). No Early Dynastic I structures were identified on Mound A and it seems likely that the burial was placed there by the contemporary inhabitants of Mound B, to which we may now turn.

In our search for the 1920s large building we soon uncovered a series of walls in the northeast corner of Mound B which had clearly been previously excavated and which we interpret as indeed being the building excavated by Langdon, Mackay and Watelin in 1926 and 1928 (Fig. 4). Many sherds of polychrome painted pottery support this interpretation. The southern limit of the building is marked by a substantial boundary wall or platform only partly accessible under the spoil heaps from the old



**Fig. 2** Early Dynastic I grave from Mound A. Grave goods.



**Fig. 3** Early Dynastic I grave from Mound A. Stamp seal.





**Fig. 4** Mound B. Surface architecture in NE Area.

excavations. This platform comprises two parts, the northern section constructed of *Riemchen-nahe* bricks, 22 x 9.5 x 8.5 cm, while the southern section consists of plano-convex bricks, 20 x 9.5 x 6.5, neatly laid in herringbone fashion. The evidence of the bricks, then, suggests that use of the platform spans both the Jemdet Nasr and Early Dynastic periods. As we have stated, the main large building excavated in the 1920s lies directly to the north of the platform, its exact relationship obscured by previous excavation and by the location of the 1920s spoilheaps. The area to the south of the platform, however, had not previously been excavated and upon further investigation was shown to comprise an extensive burnt rubbish dump, a section of which we excavated in area 4C88.

The rubbish dump itself proved to have more than one phase, here considered from the lowermost upwards. Underlying the dump is a stretch of well-built wall, 1.5 m wide and constructed of *Riemchen* bricks, with associated plaster floors and deposits rich in bevelled rim bowl sherds. This evidence, admittedly from a restricted area, may point for the first time to the existence of a Late Uruk precursor to the nearby large building of Jemdet Nasr date excavated in the 1920s. Overlying these probable Late Uruk deposits, a distinct series of dumping levels was discerned, yielding material which dates the lower rubbish phase to the Jemdet Nasr period. Pottery from the lower dump phase includes conical bowls and other sherds comparable to those recovered from the area of the 1920s large building, as well as a “bolas-stone” with grooved lines, typical of the Jemdet Nasr period (Matthews 1989: Fig. 5:1). The lower rubbish phase thus appears to be contemporary with the large building, and it is likely that the rubbish was thrown over the edge of the platform upon which that building stood.

The upper phase of rubbish represents a sharp break, with more heavily burnt deposits and a change in the material culture assemblage. These upper deposits had built up against the outer, plano-convex



**Fig. 5** Early Dynastic I rubbish dump. Narrow-based cup.

brick, section of the platform. The pottery is consistent throughout the many stratified layers of the upper phase. The commonest form is a narrow-based cup with fine rim, found in great numbers (Fig. 5). Very similar vessels have been found in at least approximately contemporary levels at Gubba (Fujii 1981: Fig. 19:5) and Ahmad al Hattu (Sürenhagen 1979: Fig. 4:1). It is believed that these vessels are the first precursors of the solid-footed goblets which come to typify the Early Dynastic I period. Other pottery forms of the upper phase include large bowls with incised or painted rims and decoration on the body below the rim. A range of decorative techniques is employed, often on the same vessel, such as paint, reserved slip, impression and excision. Many sherds appear to be truly transitional between Jemdet Nasr and Early Dynastic I types, suggesting that the upper phase represents the very beginning of the Early Dynastic I period in this region (pottery from the upper phase of the dump is illustrated and discussed in Matthews 1989: 237–42; 1990: 32–34).

An important collection of clay sealings with seal impressions was recovered from the upper phase of the dump. In total, 193 sealings were recovered, many only as small fragments with few identifiable markings. A selection of the seal impressions is illustrated in Figs. 6–7. Iconographically speaking these impressions bear close comparison with several other seal impression assemblages. Most notably, the seal impressions on the protocuneiform tablets from Jemdet Nasr itself have many points of comparison with this new group of impressions, both in matters of general style and as regards specific motifs such as trees, horned quadrupeds, naked humans, rosettes and assorted filler elements (for the tablet seal impressions, see Matthews 1993). Other comparable groups include impressions on tablets and sealings from Uruk dating to the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods (Brandes 1979), impressions on Jemdet Nasr date tablets from Tell Uqair (Lloyd and Safar 1943), impressions on sealings from an Early Dynastic I rubbish dump at Fara (Martin 1988; Matthews 1991), and impressions on sealings from Early Dynastic I levels at Nippur (Hansen 1971). The large corpus of sealings from the Seal Impression Strata at Ur are not so directly comparable and, as judged by their pottery and textual associations, are certainly later in the Early Dynastic I period than the material from Jemdet Nasr (Legrain 1936; Matthews 1993).

One of the main points of interest of the Early Dynastic I rubbish dump sealings from Jemdet Nasr is their function. As we have stated, very similar, but not identical, seal impressions are attested on one third of the protocuneiform tablets from the site. The Early Dynastic I impressions, however, are not on tablets but on clay sealings, pieces of clay used to secure commodity containers or store-room doors. A range of containers is attested, including pots, packages and baskets, while some pieces had sealed store-room doors. We should not overstress this aspect, but it is worth noting that the only collection of Early Dynastic I tablets, from Ur, is completely lacking in seal impressions, a trait also found in the case of later Early Dynastic tablets from Fara, Abu Salabikh and elsewhere. It is further noteworthy that, with the exception of Uruk, we do not find collections of commodity and store-room sealings pre-dating Early Dynastic I in south Mesopotamia. These pieces of evidence, patchy and incomplete as they are bound to be, suggest a major shift in sealing practices in south Mesopotamia during the early part of the third millennium BC, with the practice of sealing diverging from that of writing. This shift may reflect the ever-increasing capability of writing to convey information without the need for iconographic supplementation in the form of seal impressions.

Rubbish always has a source, but we have not yet identified from where the Early Dynastic I rubbish at Jemdet Nasr originated. We assume that a building of some stature may be involved, perhaps a direct descendant of the large building of Jemdet Nasr date immediately to the north. To the south of the dump is an expanse of featureless silt, of unclear origin. To the southwest of the dump plano-convex brick architecture was planned and partly excavated in area 4C45. The 4C45 building survived to only a few courses in height. A burial, without grave goods, was located against one wall face, while a deposit of broken cups and vessels lay in the northeastern corner of a room (Fig. 8). A coherent pottery assemblage was recovered from this building, dominated by tall cups (Fig. 9) which we believe fall chronologically between the narrow-based cups of the rubbish dump at Jemdet Nasr and the fully-



Fig. 6 Early Dynastic I rubbish dump. Seal impressions. Scale 1:1.

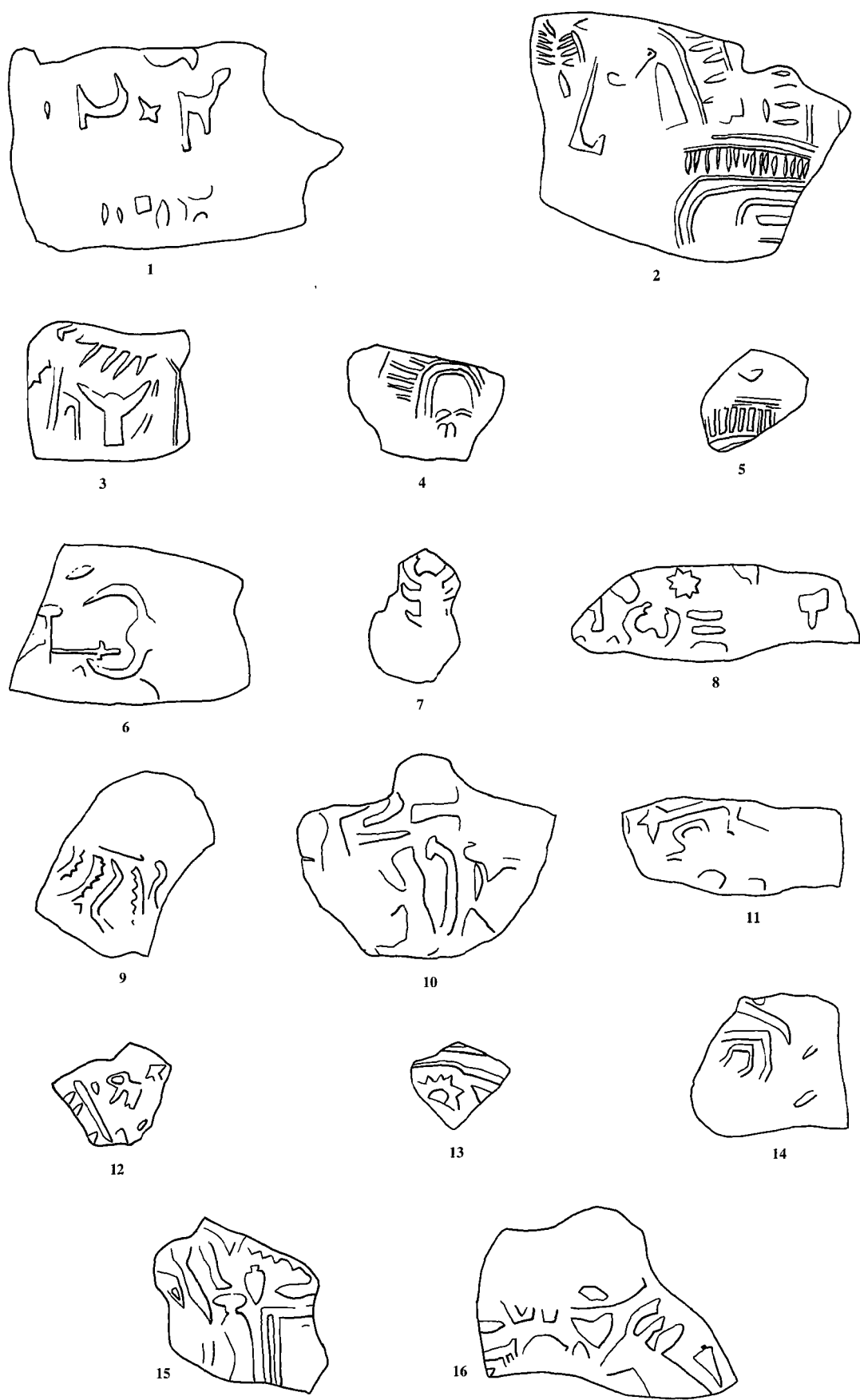


Fig. 7 Early Dynastic I rubbish dump. Seal impressions. Scale 1:1.

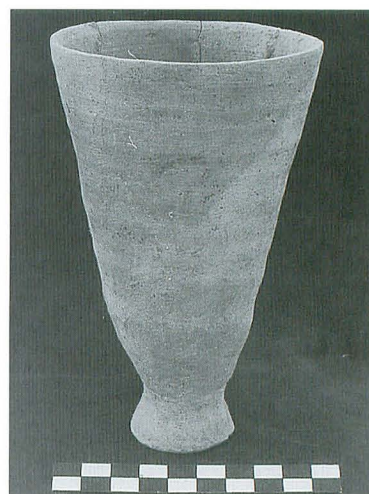




**Fig. 8** Early Dynastic I building in 4C45. Deposit of vessels.

fledged solid-footed goblets also attested on the surface at Jemdet Nasr and at many other later Early Dynastic I locations in southern Mesopotamia. Two clay sealings with cylinder seal impressions were also retrieved (Fig. 7:15–16).

The importance of the Early Dynastic I material from Jemdet Nasr, briefly covered in this article, lies in its attestation of continued occupation at the site after the abandonment and possible destruction of the large administrative building from which the important collection of protocuneiform tablets was excavated in the 1920s. The rubbish dump and its clay sealings show the perpetuation of administrative activity at the site in the centuries immediately after the Jemdet Nasr period, complementing the evidence for a major occupation at Jemdet Nasr in the preceding Late Uruk period. These pieces of evidence help to place the extraordinary discoveries at Jemdet Nasr in 1926 and 1928 within a more rounded and satisfactory archaeological context, but it is sincerely to be hoped that at some date further work at Jemdet Nasr may substantially enhance this still fragmentary picture of the past.



**Fig. 9** Early Dynastic I building in 4C45. Tall cup.



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